

ART  
TALK

Allen Rappersberg: Drawing and Writing, 1972-1991

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp says this survey of drawings at Marc Selwyn Fine Art offers an intimate view of an enigmatic artist.

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Apr 10, 2014

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Allen Rappersberg is considered a first generation Conceptual artist, one who embraced the art of ideas in the late 1960s after graduating from Chouinard Art Institute, the experimental art school that now is Cal Arts. From the outset, he was not confined by the more theoretical or reductive approach used on the East Coast. He integrated wit and irony like John Baldessari or William Wegman and though he initially used photography, as they did, Rappersberg, who is from Cleveland, quickly incorporated overlooked Americana such as post cards. Even more significantly, he used the written word, whether taken from literature or advertising or popular culture. Tracking the development of his ideas in over two decades of drawings is an [exhibition at Marc Selwyn Fine Arts](#) in Beverly Hills on view through May 17.



*Searching for passion and sex (and an even exchange), 1979*  
Pencil on paper, 23 x 29 inches

This exhibition, installed with excellent lighting in Selwyn's new Beverly Hills gallery designed by architect Frederick Fisher, reveals how Rappersberg painstakingly copied illustrations, letters, cartoon characters, the covers of books, stacks of books, the insides of books. As curator Leslie Jones wrote in the catalog, "Rappersberg not only challenged assumptions about the medium but transformed drawing into a critical device suited to his own brand of conceptualism."



*A Quiet Sketch of a Novel, 1975*  
Pencil on paper, 23 x 29 inches

In a series from the late '80s, *The Gift and The Inheritance*, he would draw a book from his own collection. Whoever bought the drawings would get an agreement that upon the artist's demise, Rappersberg would leave them the original book as well. (Of course, this mandate has not yet been tested.) This is an artist who, in 1974, hand-copied the entire text of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, a book about a painting, onto canvas panels, a work now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Many of the drawings in this show trace the intersection between images and words, highlighting the ways each operates in the mind.



*Self-Portrait Making a Face Like Barney Bear, 1975*

Most works in the show are drawn by Rappersberg with considerable refinement but in styles borrowed from other sources such as photographs or illustrations. ("Self-Portrait Making a Face Like Barney Bear," 1975.) In this way, the artist distances himself from what is considered to be the most revealing of artistic practices, drawing, so that the pieces conceal as much as they reveal though his droll captions appear in his own script. The entire show is like a captivating novel that is hard to put down; the delightful drawings are short chapters that leave us wanting more.



*Searching for Passion and Sex (and an even change, people in boat on cave), 1979*  
Pencil on paper, 23 x 29 inches

But wait, there is more! In L.A., many people remember Rappersberg's 1971 project, *Al's Hotel*, seven rooms in a rented house that he decorated in themes -- Jesus Room, Al Room -- and offered to clients for \$30 a night. This infamous project is being recreated this May at the [Frieze Art Fair](#) in New York, though now rooms go for \$350 a night. So Rappersberg art and ideas continue to thrive on both coasts.

For more information, go to [marcelwynfineart.com](http://marcelwynfineart.com)